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Farm Bill Reauthorization

Congress this week overwhelmingly approved a five-year, \$307 billion farm bill, sending it to President Bush for what is expected to be a futile veto.

The 81-to-15 Senate and 318-to-106 House votes provided more than the two-thirds majorities that would be needed to override a pledged veto by President Bush. While the majority of the funding is aimed at ensuring access to food for the poor, the bill also provides help to farmers, boosts conservation efforts and implements reforms.

Under the bill, disaster assistance will become a permanent, paid for program for farmers with crops struck by natural disasters such as drought and flood. America's farmers feed our nation and the world, and this bill recognizes their great contribution.

For consumers, food labeling of our meat supply and produce will become mandatory after six years of delays.

The bill also boosts conservation programs that reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water and air quality, increase wildlife habitat and reduce damage caused by floods and other natural disasters by \$7.9 million.

Under the bill, farmers will be able to play a growing role in fueling America's energy independence. The Farm Bill invests \$1 billion in renewable energy focusing on new technologies and new sources. It takes another critical step in transitioning biofuels beyond corn to non-food crops and sources such as switchgrass, woodchips and corn stalks.

During debate I offered the following statement on the bill:

I strongly support the Food and Energy Security Act of 2007 and congratulate the Committee on providing a bill that includes needed and critical reforms that improve access to food and nutrition, provide more equitable access to research funding and renew America's commitment to conservation.

This bill correctly focuses on the people who need the most help. In fact, nearly three-quarters of the bill will be directed to nutrition programs that will assist 38 million American families afford healthy food. It updates the Food Stamp program and increases funding for food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens.

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I am particularly encouraged that the bill increases agricultural research funding for Historically Black Colleges. This is important because minority institutions are usually left out when it comes to federal research funding. As an example, I point to a Government Accountability Office study conducted in 2003 which indicated that 1890 Land Grant institutions received less than 2 percent of the competitive funding available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This bill represents a step in the right direction.

The bill also provides for mandatory funding of the 2501 Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Outreach Program. This should help to slow the troubling trend of significant land loss by African American and other socially disadvantaged producers.

Additionally, the bill significantly boosts spending for conservation programs to reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water and air quality, increase wildlife habitat and reduce damage caused by floods and other natural disasters.

Of particular interest to my home state of North Carolina, fruit and vegetable producers will have their own place in the Farm Bill for the first time. The bill includes more than \$1.3 billion to support research, pest management, trade promotion and nutrition for the industry.

Also of interest to North Carolina, this bill takes another important step in moving biofuels beyond focusing on corn. It reduces the current tax credit for corn-based ethanol by six cents per gallon and creates a new tax credit to promote the production of cellulosic biofuels.

While the Farm Bill may not be perfect, the good far outweighs any shortcomings.

Second Chance Act

America has more of its people in prison than any other developed nation in the world - more than two million people. The vast majority - 95% of the men and women in our prisons - will eventually return to the community. That means every year more than 650,000 offenders are released from state and federal prisons to return to civilian life.

Having paid their debt to society, these men and women deserve a second chance. Their families, spouses and children deserve a second chance. A second chance means an opportunity to turn a life around - a chance to break the grip of drugs; a chance to support a family, to pay taxes and to be self-sufficient.

Unfortunately, few of those who return to their communities are prepared for their release or receive any supportive services. When the prison door swings open an ex-offender may receive a bus ticket and spending money for a day or two. Many leave prison to return to the same environment which saw them offend in the first place.

Upon release, offenders often face additional barriers to reentry: serious physical and mental health problems; no place to stay; and lack the education or experience needed to gain and hold a job. As a result, two out of three will be rearrested for new crimes within the first three years after their release. Youthful offenders are even more likely to re-offend.

One third of all correction departments provide no services to released offenders, and most departments do not offer a transitional program, placing a heavy burden on families and communities. Considering the cost of incarceration - as much as \$40,000 a year - as well as the social and economic costs of crime to the community, it only makes sense to ensure that ex-offenders successfully reenter our communities and reduce recidivism.

The Second Chance Act of 2007 will help to provide that opportunity. The legislation was signed into law last month after strong bipartisan support in Congress. The Second Chance Act will provide transitional assistance to help ex-offenders cope with the challenges of reentry. It will reduce recidivism. It will help reunite families and protect communities. It will enhance public safety and save taxpayer dollars. It is the humane thing to do. It is the responsible thing to do. It is the right thing to do.

No single piece of legislation is going to solve the reentry crisis we are facing, but the Second Chance Act is a good start. I hope that with the passage of this bill we will begin a new era in criminal justice.

Quick Facts on the Second Chance Act

Community Safety through Recidivism Prevention or the Second Chance Act of 2007, H. R. 1593, will take effect on October 8th, 2008. It outlines dozens of opportunities for adult and juvenile offenders to get help to stem the tide of re-incarceration by making it easier for them to reintegrate into society. It includes:

- Educational, literacy, vocational programs inside correctional facilities as well as job placement services to facilitate re-entry into the community.
- Substance abuse treatment and services, including outpatient as well as residential services and recovery programs.
- Coordinated supervision and comprehensive services for offenders upon release from prison, jail, or a juvenile facility, including housing and mental and physical health care in order to facilitate re-entry into the community. This includes veteran-specific services for eligible veterans.
- Family development services with an emphasis on encouraging offenders to develop safe, healthy, and responsible family relationships and parent-child relationships; and by involving the entire family unit in comprehensive reentry services.
- The involvement of prison, jail, or juvenile facility mentors in the reentry process and enabling those mentors to remain in contact with offenders while in custody and after reentry into the community.

North Carolina Biofuels Center in Oxford

I recently had the pleasure of taking part in the ceremony celebrating the opening of the North Carolina Biofuels Center in Oxford. I made the following remarks during that ceremony:

With the opening of the North Carolina Biofuels Center, we are taking an unprecedented step toward making this state the epicenter of biofuels research, development and implementation; to making this state the leader in the green energy revolution.

This unique facility is the product of local, state, and federal government working together to address the immediate need of energy independence in the United States.

I don't have to tell you, but the cost of a gallon of unleaded gasoline is \$3.60. For diesel fuel, it's \$4.20. High fuel prices are challenging enough for working families, but the trickle-down into food prices is now a deluge.

We are experiencing the highest food price inflation in this country in 17 years. Every day, my office is flooded with calls, letters, faxes, and emails, all saying, "We're hurting down here. What are you doing to deal with the sky-rocketing price of fuel?"

In addition to dealing with the high cost of fuel, our children are depending upon us to address the causes of global warming and climate change, and that means reducing carbon emissions. The need for change is obvious. The need for vision to move us away from our fossil fuels addiction has never been more pertinent.

What do we do? We cannot continue to, what we call, "kick the can down the road" and hope that on another day and another time we can solve this problem. We must begin to solve this problem now. We must build and develop an industry for renewable, non-petroleum fuel sources to power our country's transportation needs. This will require the cooperation of business, researchers, consumers, and lawmakers to make it work. It will be difficult, costly, and certainly not without obstacles.

Fortunately, the location of the Biofuels Center is uniquely positioned to meet North Carolina's abundant agricultural resources, multi-campus university research capabilities, and the Research Triangle's ability to develop diversity in our nation's energy supplies.

Congress, for its part, is committed to trying to create a healthy environment for the renewable fuels industry. My committee, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, was instrumental in passing the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, which was recently signed into law. Congress mandated a five-fold increase in renewable fuel - to 36 billion gallons - by 2022. Currently, corn-based ethanol is the primary source for this renewable fuel, but the current food crisis demands expansion and diversification to other sources.

While there are many obstacles to overcome, cellulosic ethanol holds great promise as a truly renewable fuel source. Wheat straw, corn stalks, grass and wood chips, which can be used to produce cellulosic ethanol, are cheap and abundant.

Conversion to cellulosic ethanol also requires less fossil fuel, so it would have a greater impact than corn ethanol on reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. Expanding the development and use of these renewable, homegrown fuels is a critical component of our transition from current dependency on petroleum for our fuel needs.

Growing these sources of energy represents not only a commitment to improving our national and economic security as well as being good environmental stewards, but also presents the opportunity for an economic windfall in the state of North Carolina.

Farmers here in the First Congressional District are very excited about the possibility of implementing the growth of grasses and other grains that can be used for biomass. Already, they've seen the economic possibilities of biofuels in the great profits for corn. However, corn is not the endgame. This is what makes the opening of this facility so momentous. If we can work together to foster the growth of green energy, we can put rural America back on the map.

The Biofuels Center is the product of the recognition of a problem. It is the creator of a strategic vision to address that problem, and will be the conduit for solutions to catalyze the green revolution. I am pleased to be here, and I am thrilled to have the Biofuels Center here in Oxford. I look forward to a long and fruitful partnership between all of us here today.

Thank you.

Weldon's 4th Annual Constituent Service Day

I welcome area residents to join me at the Weldon District Office on Friday, May 23rd for an open house and Constituent Service Day.

The event serves as a reminder that my office is here and ready to help people find solutions to problems they may experience with the federal government. It's been a great success in the past and I look forward to this year's event.

Last year, nearly 600 people attended the event at the West Second Street office. The event will feature drills and a presentation of the colors by the Northampton County West High School's JROTC as well as free barbecue and beverages. Music will be provided by the Gaston College Preparatory School's Jazz Ensemble and Drum Line.

I will also be paying a special tribute to Dr. Salter Cochran, a retired physician who touched the lives of everyone in the community during the 51-year span of his practice in Weldon. I will also recognize the students who earned internships, military academy nominations and Congressional Black Caucus scholarships.

The event will be held Friday, May 23rd, from 4 to 7 p.m. at 311 West 2nd Street in Weldon. The Weldon District Office serves people in Halifax, Northampton, Warren, Vance and Granville counties.